



Renovate, preserve: New owners of historic building have ambitious plans

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By Paul Grimaldi

PROVIDENCE

An overshadowed piece of the Capital Center landscape will get shined up by a Warwick company that wants to move its headquarters to Providence.

Moran Shipping Agencies Inc., which facilitates international trade by assisting oceangoing vessels transiting U.S. ports, is crafting plans to refurbish the former Rhode Island Medical Society building at 106 Hayes St. Moran recently paid \$3.6 million for the historic building

The building has sat, virtually empty, since early 2003 when the Medical Society sold it to Fall River chiropractor and real-estate investor Walter L. Bronhard for about \$2 million.

After the sale, the society moved across Route 95 to office space in The Foundry complex. The Hayes Street building, for a time, became a base for contractors converting the Masonic Temple into the Renaissance Providence hotel.

"We're really interested in bringing her back to her original splendor," said Jason Kelly, Moran's vice president.

The company is working with historic preservationists to develop a plan for refurbishing the two-story brick building into offices that can accommodate Moran's 30-plus Rhode Island workers and about 15 more it plans to hire over the next few years. The company employs 130 people, overall, at 23 offices in port cities around the country.

In 1912, the state's physicians erected the building, with its library and lecture hall, to serve as an education center for its members. The Medical Society wanted a "symbolic" presence near the "marble palace" politicians had built for themselves when they erected the State House, said Newell Warde, the society's current executive president.

"[The building] was symbolic of the role the society wanted to play in the civil society of Rhode Island," he said.

The building served as a home for the society for nearly a century before it moved to leased space at The Foundry, on Promenade Street.

The society could not afford to renovate the building to suit its current needs, nor did it have the money to reshape the interior into space it could lease.

The loss of parking spaces to shoppers heading to Providence Place mall made using the building for after-hours and weekend society meetings difficult. The building sits between the massive mall and the blocky hotel.

The society shopped the building, along with a 28-car parking lot and an adjacent house on Hayes Street, before selling it to Bronhard. (He recently spent \$3 million converting another Masonic Temple, this one in Fall River, into 50 luxury units that he is renting.)

Renovating the Medical Society building will be left up to the Moran company, which has a long history of its own.

“As a maritime company, we are particularly proud that on our 70th anniversary we have plans to expand our headquarters in Rhode Island, a state with such a rich maritime heritage,” James A. Black, Moran’s president and chief executive officer, wrote in an e-mail to The Journal.

Black and his brother Michael bought the company from a third brother, F. Robert, in 1985. Michael is the company’s chairman.

Moran agents hire the pilots that steer ships into ports and the tugboats that nudge the vessels up to docks. They help cargos clear customs and help sick crew members visit doctors onshore. They’ll send flowers to a captain’s wife in a faraway country and send condolences to his next of kin if he’s lost at sea.

“We take care of a vessel and her crew when they are far from home,” said Kelly, who runs the company’s Providence office. “Whatever that vessel needs, we take care of that.

“It’s a very romantic business.”

It’s also an expanding one, apparently.

The company has outgrown the 6,000-square-foot office it leases off Jefferson Boulevard, Kelly said. For a while, the company considered shifting the headquarters to Houston, where James Black works.

“We started looking a few years ago for a new building,” Kelly said. “The Medical Society building was the one that captured our attention.”

The building’s unique purpose and classical architecture placed it on the National Register of Historic Places. Speakers in its lecture hall shared the latest medical breakthroughs with the

state's physicians and the three levels of cast-iron shelving in its library held 50,000 volumes on medical topics, including one dating back to 1501.

"We were bursting at the seams," said Warde, who came to work for the society in 1984.

Three years later, the society turned a corner when it donated most of its books to Brown University. By the time Providence Place opened in 1999, the organization had changed to the point where it made little sense to keep the building. Medical specialization and the Internet lessened the effectiveness and need of mass meetings, Warde said.

That left its 11 workers rattling around in a 12,000-square-foot building. So it went up for sale.

"We found ourselves sitting in this huge building and we didn't have any use for it," Warde said, adding that Bronhard's plan to cut the building up into condominiums didn't pan out.

News that the two-story brick building would be brought back to life pleased Warde, the society's executive director.

"The building is a problem and a puzzle — somehow it works for Moran and it's unique and wonderful," Warde said. "We are delighted that the new owners are interested in historic preservation."

Kelly, of Moran Shipping, said the ability to apply the state's historic tax credit to the project was a factor in its decision to buy the building.

"We firmly believe that the tax-credit program has been a great program," he said. "Our company is a good example of how the tax credit program can maintain and grow investment in Rhode Island."

The program was the driving factor behind the renovation of the Masonic Temple, which towers over the north side of the Medical Society building. And, earlier this month, developers said they would use tax credits to rebuild the Old Colony Bank building, on Weybosset Street.

Now, the program is the key to renovating another of the city's noteworthy buildings, work that's sent Kelly on a voyage to uncover part of the state's architectural history.

He uncovered the building's original drawings, which fell into the hands of a Cranston architectural firm, and learned that there is a time capsule in its cornerstone. But few pictures of the building's interior exist, making restoration plans hard to develop.

"It's been something of an architectural Da Vinci Code for us," Kelly said. "We've really enjoyed it."

He urged anyone with pictures that show the interior of the Rhode Island Medical Society building to contact him.